

MONU

Unfinished Urbanism

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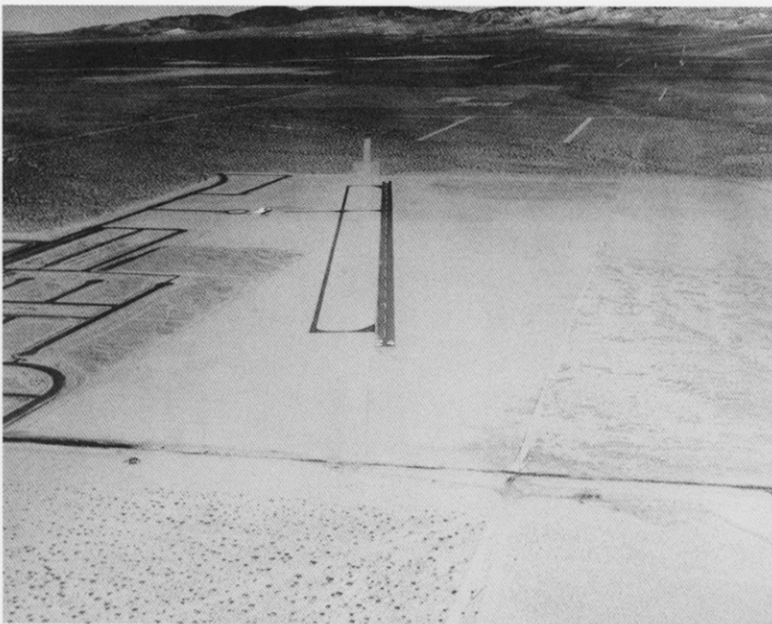
California City

By *Elia*n Somers

In the early 1950s the Czech-born sociologist Nathan K. Mendelsohn envisioned his City of the Future. In order to try out his community theories Mendelsohn bought 330 km² of Mojave desert land.

The construction of California City began: A massive grid with 52,000 plots of property, highways, streets and cul-de-sacs was laid out, with water lines, a power grid and street signs. A Central Park with the world's largest plastic sealed lake, golf courses and a grid of model homes were realized. From his model home Mendelsohn watched his city grow.

Mendelsohn launched an ambitious sales campaign. An air bridge to Los Angeles was initiated to fly in the new pioneers. Actors figured in the City of the Future. Promotional advertising claimed the developer's theory on limitless water in the desert.



Over the next decade Nathan K. Mendelsohn sold most plots of property.

However, although most of the plots in the city were owned, many remained empty. Most of the owners have never come. Up until today plot owners must pay taxes on the largely undeveloped land in order to help fund the city.

A California City Chronology:

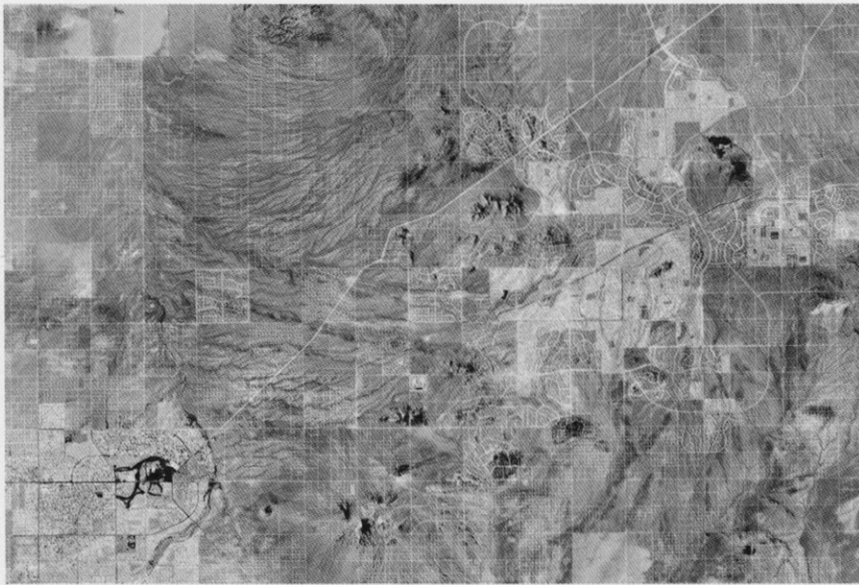
Realty Promoters Cash in as Desert Lures Thousands (*Los Angeles Times*, 1961); **City Plan Wins Prize** (*The California City Sun*, 1961); **City Rising in Desert** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1963); **California City: A Miracle in the Desert** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1963); **Miracle Continues at California City** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1964); **Firms Propose 'Super' Airport** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1968); **Developers of California City Sued** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1968); **California City Firm to Be Acquired** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1969); **California City in New Try for Viable Plan** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1977); **Partners Hope to Fill California City with Casinos, Hotels and Tourists** (*Los Angeles Times*, 1997); **Desert Residents Hope Prison Will Flourish**



Where Homes Failed (*Los Angeles Times*, 1999); Hyundai Proposal Puts Town on Fast Track (*Los Angeles Daily News*, 2002); Building Booming in California City (*Mojave Desert News*, 2004); California City's Year-to-Year Price Increase Was California's Sixth Fastest (*Los Angeles Daily News*, 2004); California City Building Permits Continue to Climb (*Mojave Desert News*, 2006); California City Third Fastest-Growing in State in 2007 (*Mojave Desert News*, 2007); Effort to Attract State University Continues (*Desert News*, 2008); Space Station Village Coming to California City (*Local News*, 2008)

With a background in photography and architecture, Elian Somers investigates the urban utopian landscape, in particular the interplay between architecture and urban planning, ideologies and (geo)politics. In her long-term, research-based projects she is in search of constructed realities and truths, hidden and virtual histories, and the utopian experiment. Multiple realities, histories and truths intermingle in her works. Somers' works have been shown at international exhibitions, and published in various art and architecture magazines. In 2013 her book *Border Theories* was published, in 2017 the publication *One and Another State of Yellow*.

All images and text in this contribution are from the project California City, 2010-2012, ©Elian Somers



California City
- Parcelation Plan
(detail), based on
archival material
(Source: Kern County
Mapping), 2010